

VZCZCXYZ0000
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHGT #0243 0582004
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 272004Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4861
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS GUATEMALA 000243

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCRM](#) [KJUS](#) [ASEC](#) [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [ES](#) [GT](#)
SUBJECT: RURAL PROTESTS PRESENT CHALLENGES TO GOG

11. SUMMARY: Violent protests in the largely Mayan indigenous Provinces of Solola and Izabal in late February focused public attention on the difficulties the Colom government is having with fulfilling campaign promises to provide law and order to its largely rural indigenous electorate. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) On February 21, 1,500 indigenous persons held a rally in the Izabal Department city of Livingston in eastern Guatemala, protesting the February 14 detention of Romero Chok, who was accused of leading a series of illegal land take overs. According to eyewitness and press accounts, when GOG representatives failed to attend the rally the group attacked the local police substation, taking 29 members of the National Police (PNC) hostage. According to reports the large crowd overwhelmed the police, and after disarming the officers took them by canoe to the isolated village of Maya Creek. The police were held overnight in a local school, but were subsequently released unharmed in exchange for GOG assurances to meet with local leaders.

13. (SBU) On February 14, Romero Chok was arrested for illegal land seizure, aggravated robbery and illegal detention stemming from land seizures he reportedly led in the Departments of Izabal and Alta Verapaz. Chok reportedly targeted both privately owned property and land belonging to Guatemalan Nature Reserves for occupation, which led both private individuals and environmental groups to initiate legal actions against him. An Embassy contact characterized Chok as a leader who exercised his substantial influence to encourage illegal actions, adding that his group is well-armed and enjoys a great deal of local support. The February 14 detention was a result of the first of several cases that name Chok as the main defendant, and it is expected that the list of charges against Chok will grow as additional cases work their way through the Guatemalan court system. The Administration has agreed to meet with Chok's supporters as part of the deal to free the PNC.

14. (SBU) In a separate incident on February 20, approximately five thousand mostly indigenous people gathered in the capital of Solola Department in central Guatemala to protest Police inaction in the wake of a series of local kidnappings and sought to lynch the perpetrators. Locals claim that a kidnapping band carried out 15 kidnappings and numerous other acts of extortion this year. Protest leaders threatened to take matters into their own hands if the PNC did not move to arrest the alleged kidnappers. Some protesters reportedly believed that police were complicit in the kidnappings. Governor Elena Yojcom Ujpan along with police and justice sector representatives, addressed the crowd, but their calls for patience and calm were roundly booed. Following the rally a large group of protesters burned the alleged perpetrator's residences as well as his place of business. At one point the crowd turned on PNC agents, resulting in the temporary detention of 16 protesters.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: Security, both in Guatemala City and in the outlying departments, continues to be a front-burner issue for the new administration. Whether the underlying cause of these social protests is a lack of police enforcement as in Solola, or legal proceedings stemming from un-checked land invasions as in Livingston, the resulting violence serves to undermine the rule of law, further alienate local inhabitants from the PNC, and create doubts about the new administrations ability to bring law and order to rural Guatemala. These two incidents stem from different root problems, but both pose challenges to a new administration that has promised to support indigenous peoples' interests and at the same time enforce the rule of law. END COMMENT.
Derham